

Two scenarios for the levelling up white paper

Robin Hambleton

Be wary of ministers offering nothing more than ‘symbolic reassurance’ that something is being done, writes the emeritus professor of city leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol.

It is now over two years since the Conservative party manifesto of November 2019 set out two major promises relating to ‘levelling up’ our country.

First, a new Conservative government would level up the UK by ‘not just investing in our great towns and cities, as well as rural and coastal areas, but giving them far more control of how that investment is made’. Second, the manifesto stated that ‘... we need to get away from the idea that “Whitehall knows best”’.

In practice there has been no progress on either of these desirable objectives. Instead, Prime Minister Johnson has prioritised slogans and speeches containing flowery rhetoric over policy substance.

Over the summer it became increasingly clear that vague promises and vacuous statements were failing to disguise the absence of progress in relation to the delivery of any kind of levelling up policy. The government was forced to do something.

The Cabinet reshuffle in September, which saw the appointment of Michael Gove to the position of secretary of state at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, signalled a move to give the policy some momentum, and a white paper on levelling up was promised for the autumn. We are still waiting.

Key challenges for the White Paper

To be credible the white paper will need to set out bold and imaginative policies designed to deliver the two promises made in the Conservative party manifesto.

It must explain exactly what levelling up means, and it must provide precise details of how the success, or otherwise of levelling up policies will be measured.

Any effective approach to levelling up will require three related sets of policies. By this I mean policies that:

- 1) Level up people - Inequalities in life chances, education, employment, health, wealth and well being will need to be addressed.

- 2) Level up places – It is important to recognise the spatial dimension of socio-economic disadvantage and introduce measures that enable all localities to transform their economies and respond to the climate crisis, and
- 3) Level up power – Elected local authorities must be given powers to orchestrate local cross-sector collaboration, galvanising the energies and enthusiasms of place-based communities and stakeholders.

The white paper should announce draft performance indicators relating to these three dimensions of levelling up. These can then be improved and refined in a process of open dialogue with local leaders, businesses, trade unions and civil society.

Will any of this happen? Here are two scenarios.

A gloomy scenario: language trumps reality

This scenario is informed by the far-sighted analysis of ‘symbolic politics’, set out over forty years ago, by Murray Edelman, an influential American political scientist. In his book, *Political language: Words that succeed and policies that fail* (1977), Professor Edelman explains that it can be the **language** about political events, rather than the events themselves, that everyone experiences.

He demonstrates how the language politicians use when they discuss issues can provide ‘symbolic reassurance’ that something is being done. In this way policies that are demonstrably unsuccessful can have political viability.

In this scenario, levelling up strategy for the UK becomes a steady stream of eye-catching, but relatively inexpensive and insignificant infrastructure projects scattered across marginal constituencies. Meanwhile, the crushing inequality between people and places would continue, and could get even worse, and power would be further centralised at the heart of our increasingly autocratic state.

An uplifting scenario: a compelling strategy emerges

In a more hopeful scenario, the levelling up white paper sets out detailed strategies on how to tackle the three dimensions of inequality set out above. Convincing policies designed to level up people, places and power are articulated.

To the surprise of many commentators, the white paper reveals that civil servants have carried out detailed international research on societies that are already ‘levelled up’. By drawing lessons directly from countries that have long been committed to fairness and local democracy, the white paper proposes radical constitutional change.

Not only does it set out practical measures to rebalance power in our super-centralised country, it sets out a raft of bold new policies designed to put caring for people and the planet at the centre of public policy.

In my recent book, *Cities and communities beyond COVID-19*, I suggest that a wise strategy for regeneration and recovery should pick up on, and be guided by, the multitude of wonderful community-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic – concern for others, working together, commitment to local communities, and a commitment to the co-creation of innovative solutions.

Which of my two scenarios would you prefer?

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